New Blackfriars

New Blackfriars 104 (2023): 765-779 DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12866

Thomas Aquinas, Saint for Our Times?

Michael S. Sherwin OP

Abstract

Why celebrate Thomas Aquinas? Three eras that celebrated Aquinas in unique ways—the Fourteenth century that canonized him, the Sixteenth century that declared him a doctor of the Church, and the nineteenth century that made him patron of the schools—all struggled with the corrosive effects of nominalism and voluntarism on Western culture. With the help of G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis, this essay suggests that these eras were drawn to Aquinas because his theology offers an antidote against these twin diseases. Specifically, Thomas Aquinas's theology can help us confront the ills of nominalism and voluntarism by encouraging us to celebrate nature, grace, and Christian apprenticeship in virtue as the perennial gifts of God's love.

Keywords

Aquinas, Grace, Nature, Apprenticeship, Virtue

Why celebrate Thomas Aquinas?[1] Now that seven hundred years have passed since his canonization, this becomes a legitimate question. The Church has a veritable cloud of saints. Why single out this Medieval friar from Roccasecca? What is there about Tommaso d'Aquino that leads successive generations to celebrate him? Once we pose the question this way, we find that we are not merely asking something about Aquinas; we are also asking a question about past generations and about our own. Just as it takes two to tango, it takes a willing community to celebrate a saint. G. K. Chesterton recognized this. He held, however, that people do not always consciously know why they celebrate certain saints. 'Each generation', he asserts, 'seeks its saint by instinct; and he is not what the people want, but rather what

[1] An earlier version of this essay was delivered as the Saint Thomas Day Lecture at Thomas Aquinas College in Northfield, Massachusetts on 7 March 2023.

© 2023 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

the people need'.[2] Chesterton explains that 'the saint is a medicine because he is an antidote. Indeed that is why the saint is often a martyr; he is mistaken for a poison because he is an antidote'.[3] Are we drawn to celebrate Thomas Aquinas because his life and thought offer us an antidote to the poisons of our age?

It is perhaps significant that it was not Thomas's own Thirteenth century that canonized him, but instead the calamitous Fourteenth century—and calamitous it certainly was.[4] There were wars and rumors of wars, there were unseasonable storms and periodic pestilences—all of which led to the crisis known as the Great Famine, which in the years leading up to Thomas's canonization killed nearly a tenth of Europe's population.[5] The pope who canonized Thomas also had his troubles.[6] Pope John XXII was at the heart of the century's conflicts and sorrows. Indeed, he survived at least two assassination attempts, during a papacy that saw him in conflict with almost every European power.[7] He even battled with the radical Franciscans, a conflict that led William of Ockham to attack the papacy directly.[8] As the second Avignon Pope, John XXII continued and solidified the Babylonian captivity, provoking the election of the antipope, Nicholas V, initiating the first volleys of what would become the Great Western Schism.[9] Europe was bleeding, hungry, and torn asunder by division. It was the denizens of this violent world that turned to Aquinas to celebrate his sanctity. Significantly, Dante was one of the first, placing Aquinas in an exalted heavenly location (the sphere of the Sun, the domain of the wise) in his *Paradiso*,[10] several years before the Pope would canonize Thomas officially in 1323.

[2] G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933), p. 7.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] See Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Random House, 1987). Leonardas Gerulaitis, 'The Canonization of Saint Thomas Aquinas', *Vivarium* 5 (1967): pp. 25-46.

[5] William Chester Jordan, *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996). William Rosen, *The Third Horseman Climate Change and the Great Famine of the 14th Century* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2014).

[6] Louis Duval-Arnould, 'John XXII', in Philippe Levillain, ed., *The Papacy: An Encyclopedia, Volume 2: Gaius-Proxies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 847-851.

[7] Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe, 1100–1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 118. Joëlle Rollo-Koster, *Avignon and Its Papacy, 1309–1417: Popes, Institutions, and Society* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), pp. 43-56.

[8] Patrick Nold, *Pope John XXII and his Franciscan Cardinal: Bertrand de la Tour and the Apostolic Poverty Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

[9] Louis Duval-Arnould, 'John XXII', p. 850.

[10] Dante, *Paradiso* 11.

What did Dante, the Pope, and the traumatized citizens of that troubled era see in Thomas Aquinas? To answer this question, let us note two other generations that were particularly attached to the Neapolitan friar. First, there is the Sixteenth century and the era of the Catholic reform. At the height the Protestant Reformation, as the Church was promoting its own internal renewal, as well as organizing a collective defense against both Protestantism and the incursions of the Ottoman Empire, Pope Pius V proclaimed Thomas Aquinas a doctor of the Church, portraying Aquinas's thought as a bulwark against heresy and a seedbed for theological renewal.[11] The theologians at the Council of Trent and the Pastors who strove to implement the Tridentine discipline turned to Thomas Aquinas for guidance.[12] Lastly, and perhaps most revealingly for our purposes, there was the interest in Aquinas exhibited during the twilight of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century. The cry to rally around St Thomas was sent up by Pope Leo XIII in his 1879 encyclical, *Aeterni patris*, when he affirms that 'Among the Scholastic Doctors, the chief and master of all towers Thomas Aquinas, who, as Cajetan observes, because "he most venerated the ancient doctors of the Church, in a certain way seems to have inherited the intellect of all."'[13] The Pope's call to turn to the study of Aquinas received remarkable and unexpected echoes throughout Europe and the rest of the world, drawing secular thinkers (artists, statesmen, philosophers, and public intellectuals) as well as Protestant theologians to the study of the Medieval friar. Why?

Once again, the example of G. K. Chesterton is instructive. As early as 1905—almost twenty years before he became a Catholic himself—Chesterton diagnosed the intellectual and spiritual malady of his age, a malady that was increasingly drawing him to Aquinas as the antidote. Chesterton noted with alarm that contemporary society was progressively losing contact with the real. Specifically, he detected that an alarming number of the luminaries of his age were denying the reality of even the simplest verities in the natural world. Chesterton foresaw that this disease was progressive: 'The great march of mental

[11] Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, volume 1: The Person and His Work* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 325; Angelus Walz, 'San Tommaso D'Aquino dichiarato dottore della Chiesa nel 1567', *Angelicum* 44 (1967): pp. 145-173. For the text of Pope Pius V's bull, *Mirabilis Deus*, proclaiming Thomas a doctor of the Church, see *Fontes: Magnum Bullarium Romanum A Pio Quarto usque ad Innocentium IX, Opus absolutissimum Laertii Cherubini*, Editio Novíssima, Tomus Secundus (Lugduni: Sumptibus Petri Borde, Joannis et Petri Arnaud, 1692), pp. 222-223.

[12] Ulrich Horst, 'The Presence of the Dominican School of Salamanca at Trent', *Annales theologici* 18 (2004): pp. 155-174. Angelus Walz, *I domenicani al Concilio di Trento* (Rome: Herder, 1961). Theodore English, 'The Dominicans and the Catechism of the Council of Trent', *Dominicana* 7 (1923): pp. 32-36.

[13] Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, n. 17. The quotation from Cajetan is from Cajetan's *Commentary on Summa theologiae, IIa-IIae* 148.9. art. 4 (Leonine edition, vol. 10, p. 174, n.6).

destruction will go on. Everything will be denied'.[14] In the distorted and skeptical rationalism that he saw emerging around him, it was becoming 'rational' to deny what the common people saw in plain sight. Chesterton presciently affirmed that the skeptics, confident in their reasonableness, would eventually view those who affirmed simple truths as clinging irrationally to archaic beliefs as if they were articles of faith. In such an atmosphere, it thus becomes 'a reasonable position to deny the stones in the street', and from this perspective, 'a religious dogma to assert them'.[15] Years later, in presenting Aquinas as the antidote for the evils of our age, he describes the situation in the early 1930's by famously portraying his contemporaries in the following terms: 'They begin to see that, as the eighteenth century thought itself the age of reason, and the nineteenth century thought itself the age of common sense, the twentieth century cannot as yet even manage to think itself anything but the age of uncommon nonsense'.[16] What is less famously known is that Chesterton adds here that 'In those conditions, the world needs a saint'.[17]

Although Chesterton's reflections are arrestingly brilliant, and prophetic for 1905, they are more suggestive than explanatory. He leaves the reader wanting more. C. S. Lewis, from his perch in wartime Oxford would provide the needed more. Sallying North to the English boarder lands, Lewis for three evening at the University of Durham, almost exactly eighty years ago (from February 24th to the 26th, 1943), delivered the lectures that would become the slender volume, *The Abolition of Man*.[18] Lewis invited his audience to consider the consequences of two movements within contemporary society. The first is moral relativism. Specifically, the moral relativism exhibited in the logical positivism of his Oxford colleague A. J. Ayer or in the literary criticism of the Cambridge don I. A. Richards.[19] Instead of engaging them directly, Lewis turns to a text that illustrates the influence of relativism on the larger society. He draws our attention to *The Green Book*, the widely used upper form text book of English literature and composition. The coauthors of this modern guide explain to their young charges that when someone affirms that a waterfall is sublime, they are not actually saying anything about the waterfall, but only something about their subjective feelings. And, just in case their charges missed the point, these teachers of the young add: 'This confusion is continually present in language as we use it. We appear to be saying

[14] G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (London: John Lane, 1905), p. 305.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 7.
[17] *Ibid*.
[18] C. S. Lewis, *Abolition of Man* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943).
[19] Michael Ward, *After Humanity: A Guide to C. S. Lewis's The Abolition of Man* (Park Ridge, Illinois: Word on Fire Academic, 2021), pp. 20-23.

something very important about something: and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings'.[20] (David Hume could not have said it better.) Lewis considers the effect of such views upon the young reader: 'The schoolboy who reads this passage in *The Green Book* will believe two propositions: firstly, that all sentences containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker, and secondly, that all such statements are unimportant'.[21] Lewis then masterfully counters the message of *The Green Book,* by drawing on the traditions of English literature to affirm that the goal of literature is instead to help us respond emotionally as we *should* to the way things *are* in the natural world. Lewis joins his voice to that of the Anglican divine, Thomas Traherne, when Traherne asks: 'can you be righteous unless you be just in rendering to things their due esteem?'[22] Lewis agrees with Traherne that 'All things were made to be yours and you were made to prize them according to their value'.[23] Lewis affirms that far from the subjectivism of *The Green Book*, the goal of education has traditionally been to train our emotions to respond according to the truth of things. Lewis appeals to St. Augustine and to Aristotle as his authorities:

> St. Augustine defines virtue as *ordo amoris*, the ordinate condition of the affections in which every object is accorded that kind of degree of love which is appropriate to it. Aristotle [for his part] says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought.[24]

Lewis then sketches the implications of this for the larger society: 'When the age for reflective thought comes, the pupil who has been thus trained in 'ordinate affections' or 'just sentiments' will easily find the first principles in Ethics; but to the corrupt man they will never be visible at all and he can make no progress in that science'.[25] By referring to the 'first principles of Ethics', Lewis is adding a feature to his argument. An education that trains our emotional responses to things, is an education that teaches us to live according to what the Christian tradition would call the natural law, but which, Lewis, drawing on Chinese thought, describes as the *Tao*, the Way. 'This conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as "the *Tao*."'[26] He describes the Confucian version of the *Tao* in the following terms.

[20] *The Green Book*, pp. 19, 20. Cited in Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, p. 3.
[21] Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 5.
[22] Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, 1.12; Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, p. 17.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, p. 17; Augustine, *City of God* 14.22 (see also 9.5 and 11.28); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.3 (1104b10).
[25] Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, p.17.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

> It is the Way in which the universe goes on, the Way in which things everlastingly emerge, stilly and tranquilly, into space and time. It is also the Way which every man should tread in imitation of that cosmic and supercosmic progression, conforming all activities to that great exemplar.[27]

What Lewis sees as common to all the great philosophical traditions is 'the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of things the universe is and the kind of things we are'.[28] He further asserts that those who have been trained to recognize these objective goods and through a well-trained affectivity to act according to them are the great-souled people of virtue, or as one tradition describes it: they are those who have chest. By abandoning objective morality—by abandoning the Way—and the education of our affectivity that makes walking according to the Way possible, we are raising a generation of men without chests. In other words, a generation of men and women who do not have it in them to act greatly. Lewis ominously concludes that 'The practical result of education in the spirit of *The Green Book* must be the destruction of the society which accepts it'.[29]

But this is only one of the two contemporary movements that Lewis addresses. The second movement is our culture's claims to mastery over nature, which for Lewis is even more ominous because it presages not simply men without chests but the abolition of man all together. After recognizing all the good that science has brought us in the way of medicine and energy saving conveniences, Lewis first notes that what we mean by man's mastery over nature is actually 'a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument'.[30] He then adds, in the context of contraception and eugenics, both of which were just beginning to emerge from their modern infancies in 1943, that 'Man's conquest of Nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men'.[31] Lewis describes what this will ultimately mean: 'Man by eugenics, by pre-natal conditioning, and by an education and propaganda based on a perfect applied psychology' will attain 'complete control over himself'.[32] In other words, human nature itself will have surrendered to man. Or more accurately, 'the power of

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 28. On the eve of the Second World War, Lewis's polymath colleague at Magdalen College, R. G. Collingwood, makes a similar critique of the effects of the teachings of Bertrand Russell and other early proponents of analytic philosophy on Oxford undergraduates. See R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 47–50, 166–167.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Man to make himself what he pleases means … the power of some men to make other men what *they* please'.[33] A class of 'conditioners' will take the place of the *Tao* of nature: the receptivity to nature that mothers and fathers, families and communities had traditionally nurtured in their young, will now be replaced by the one thing that remains: the unbridled will of the conditioners. As Lewis explains, 'When all that says "it is good" has been debunked, what says "I want" remains'.[34] The social conditioners, therefore, 'must come to be motivated simply by their own pleasure'.[35] This is so, because 'those who stand outside all judgements of value cannot have any ground for preferring one of their own impulses to another except the emotional strength of that impulse'.[36] In other words, with the abolition of man—with the abolition of the traditional man who was the product of nature and communal nurture—all that remains, like the leering smile of the Cheshire cat, is the unbridled will to power of the few over the many. The implications of this are chilling, because they imply the ultimate revenge of nature on man's hubris.

> At the moment, then, of Man's victory over Nature, we find the whole human race subjected to some individual men, and those individuals subjected to that in themselves which is purely 'natural'—to their irrational impulses. Nature, untrammeled by values, rules the Conditioners and, through them, all humanity. Man's conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature's conquest of Man.[37]

Lewis was not sure how inevitable and how far in the future this terminal stage in Man's relationship with nature was. He did, however, hold out hope that a different future was possible. Western society can back away from this precipice by turning to what Lewis describes as 'a new Natural Philosophy'.[38] Candidly admitting that he hardly knew what he is asking for, he envisages a renewed science that 'would not do even to minerals and vegetables what modern science threatens to do to man himself'.[39] Does this possible future and the renewed philosophy of nature that it implies perhaps point to the importance of Thomas Aquinas for our Day? I would like to suggest that it does and to see clearly why this is so, we need to look anew at the three eras that have celebrated Aquinas, because I believe they each mark a stage in a spiritual disease for which Thomas Aquinas provides an antidote.

[33] *Ibid.*
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] *Ibid.*
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 79.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

First, there is the Fourteenth century. Among the crises of that century was the intellectual crisis of nominalism and voluntarism.[40] During the years leading up to Aquinas' canonization, William of Ockham not only challenged papal power, he also called into question traditional ideas about the natural world and our relationship to it and participation in it. Perhaps influenced by the terrors of the Great Famine, Ockham asserts the radical and unbridled freedom of God before the natural world.[41] Moreover, Ockham denies that universal natures have any real existence in things: only individuals (with their radically individual natures) exist.[42] Although these views have the seeming advantage of freeing God and us from the turmoil of the natural world, they also radically isolate the individual from any solidarity with God or his fellows on either the level of nature or of grace. The views articulated by Ockham, therefore, prepare the way for the crises of the next era that will celebrate Aquinas.

The Sixteenth century witnessed the theological consequences of the philosophical errors of the Fourteenth century. Specifically, nominalism renders the traditional Catholic understanding of the incarnate Word's participation in our common humanity and our participation in the divine life of the Trinity through sanctifying grace unintelligible and seemingly even blasphemous. No such participation is deemed possible in this tumultuous and fallen world. The Angry Father wills—as an expression of his radical freedom—to attribute the unique incarnate goodness and justice of his son to the reprobate masses, but this act of divine favor changes nothing in us nor bridges the abyss between wicked humans and the divine goodness.[43] We are saved from hell and given the promise of joy in heaven, but God remains a distant, if merciful, father. For the Reformers, our role is simply to accept this juridical

[40] See Joël Biard, 'Nominalism in the Later Middle Ages', in Robert Pasnau and Christina van Dyke, eds., *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 661-673. Gyula Klima, 'Nominalist Semantics', *Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, pp. 159-172. Colleen McCluskey, 'The Roots of Ethical Voluntarism', *Vivarium* 39 (2001): pp. 185–208. Tobias Hoffmann, 'Intellectualism and Voluntarism', *Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, pp. 414-427.

[41] Harry Klocker, *William of Ockham and the Divine Freedom* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1992).

[42] Gyula Klima, 'Ockham's Semantics and Ontology of the Categories', in Paul Vincent Spade, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 118-142. Paul Vincent Spade, 'Ockham's Nominalist Metaphysics: Some Main Themes', *Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, pp. 100-117. Claude Panaccio, *Ockham's Nominalism: A Philosophical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[43] Markus Wriedt, 'Luther's Theology', in Donald McKim, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 86-119. Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Ralph Keen, 'The Reformation Recovery of the Wrath of God', in Ann Astell, ed., *Saving Fear in Christian Spirituality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), pp. 169-181.

and extrinsic divine acceptance. There are no shared natures; there is no participation in the divine life. There is instead a confrontation of wills, and our part is to submit to the divine will in the act of faith. Philosophical nominalism and voluntarism have thus ripened into the theological nominalism and voluntarism of the Reformation.[44]

By the end of the Nineteenth century, the spiritual sickness of the Fourteenth century had ripened into a terminal illness. The unfettered will to power—so eloquently articulated in the madness of Nietzsche and played out on the bloody battlefields of the Twentieth century—is what confronts us now.[45] The human will is now severed even from the constraints of human nature and the comforts of the human community. Each of us, in radical and lonely isolation, must become our own artistic creation.[46]

It is here that Thomas Aquinas can provide an antidote. Not only does he come from a generation that preceded the rise of nominalism and voluntarism, his theology has characteristics that are uniquely needed today, during this terminal phase of the spiritual illness of the West. What are these characteristics? One way of answering this question would be by underlying three features: (1) he celebrates the goodness of nature on the level of the natural principles of creation, and our participation in them—a participation that makes the transcendent God of creation intimately present to each and every member of the created cosmos—even on the natural level; (2) he recognizes the reality of the Fall and of our existential participation in wounded and fallen humanity, that makes us subject to sin, death and the devil; (3) he affirms the reality of sanctifying grace that heals the wounds of fallen humanity, saves us from sin, death, and the devil; and grants us a participation in the Triune life of God, a divine life that is mediated through the incarnate Son—Christ our savior—through the action of the Holy Spirit. While all of this is true of Thomas' theology, it is also true of any Catholic doctor of the Church. These features are present in Bernard as well as Bonaventure, in Augustine as well as Athanasius. No, although those three features are an answer, they are not what makes Thomas Aquinas's theology uniquely fitted to the spiritual needs of our time. What makes Thomas Aquinas the medicine we need is his practice of appealing to the experience of nature (specifically to human

[44] Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1963).

[45] Lawrence Hatab, 'The Will to Power', in Tom Stern, ed., *The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 329-350. Maudemarie Clark, 'Nietzsche's Nihilism', *The Monist* 102 (2019): pp. 369–385. See also Michael Allen Gillespie, 'Heidegger's Nietzsche', *Political Theory* 15 (1987): pp. 424-435.

[46] Paul Franco, 'Becoming Who You Are: Nietzsche on Self-Creation', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49 (2018): pp. 52-77.

experience) to help us understand the ways of grace in the Christian call to discipleship (apprenticeship) in Christ.

When Lewis affirmed that what was needed was 'a new Natural Philosophy', he described this philosophy as promoting a science that 'when it explained it would not explain away. When it spoke of parts it would remember the whole. While studying the *It* it would not lose what Martin Buber calls the *Thou*-situation'.[47] Lewis was unable to find such a philosophy sufficiently present in his beloved Augustine; could he have found it in Aquinas? Unlike Chesterton, Lewis did not see the man from Roccasecca as providing the antidote for our contemporary ills. It was as if the Oxford don who had pierced through so many veils impeding his sight was never able to pierce the veil clouding his view of Aquinas. It was as if Lewis instinctively knew that to approach Aquinas, to see him up close, would require him—from this new perspective—to undertake changes in his life that he was not prepared to embrace. However this may be, many have found in Aquinas's philosophy of nature the principles for a renewed science.[48] The principles of Aquinas' natural philosophy are humble. His analysis of motion, of accidental and substantial change, reveal little: but what they reveal are the very qualitative aspects of the natural world, the neglect or denial of which have led to the crises of our time. To save science from itself, we need to rediscover and become receptive once again to the qualitative aspects of the natural world: to rediscover the natures of things. This is something Thomas Aquinas' humble philosophy of nature can still provide. Happily, a growing number of working scientists are finding in the principles of Thomistic natural philosophy the foundations for the very renewal of the sciences that Lewis recognized was desperately needed.[49]

Equally important is Thomas' understanding of the natural law. Here too knowledge of the natural law—or of what Aristotle describes as the first principles of practical reasoning—is humble: but these humble principles (humble like the very ground we walk on) provide the path for the Way of nature that Lewis discerned in every culture: that good is to be done and evil avoided, and all that flows from this primary

[47] Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, p. 80.

[48] See, for example, William A. Wallace, *The Modeling of Nature: Philosophy of Science and Philosophy of Nature in Synthesis* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996); Benedict Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian*, second edition (Braintree, MA: Pope John Center, 1996); William E. Carroll, 'Aquinas and Contemporary Cosmology: Creation and Beginnings', in Rodney Holder and Simon Mitton, eds., *Georges Lemaître: Life, Science and Legacy* (Berlin: Springer, 2012), pp. 75-88.

[49] See, for example, Martinez Hewlett, who, without mentioning Aquinas, notes recent developments in molecular biology that point toward a 'holistic science' that avoids the 'philosophically impoverished position of ontological reductionism'. Martinez Hewlett, 'Molecular Biology and Religion', in Philip Clayton, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 172–186.

precept.[50] What gives such force to Thomas' account is (1) that these principles are not derived *a priori* but are *per se nota*—known in every act of knowing. Knowledge of them and an inclination toward them are naturally present in every act of practical reasoning; but (2) knowing how to draw the right conclusions from these natural moral principles requires education and training. It requires education in virtue. It is here that the analogies between nature and grace become paramount. Throughout the *Second Part* of the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas offers a fine-grained analysis of acquired virtue, of the characteristics of the cardinal virtues and of the many secondary virtues that pagan Greek and Roman moralists had discerned: but then, in a move that shocks those who have been trained to view Thomas Aquinas primarily as a philosopher, Aquinas joins Augustine in affirming that these acquired virtues do not attain the goal we all seek. Aquinas recognizes that before the Fall, if we posit a state of nature unaided by grace, this integral nature could have done the good proportionate to human nature, 'such as the good of acquired virtue, but not surpassing good, as the good of infused virtue'.[51] After the Fall, however, Thomas asserts that fallen nature cannot even do the good proper to acquired virtue.[52] For Aquinas, as for Augustine, pagan virtue is unstable. Sooner or later, even the best pagan will fall into mortal sin.[53] Thus, at best, without the aid of grace, fallen human nature can, 'from its natural endowments, work some particular good, such as to build dwellings, plant vineyards, and the like'.[54]

When we read the *Second Part* of the *Summa* attentively, we discover that Aquinas undertakes his analysis of acquired virtue in order to provide analogies for how we grow in infused virtue. Only infused virtue—the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, along with the infused cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, attain the union with God and the progress toward the perfection that we all most deeply desire—a progress that finds its ultimate fulfillment in the loving vision of the Triune God in the communion of heaven.[55] 'Since', however, as the *Catechism* reminds us, 'it belongs to the supernatural order, grace escapes our experience and cannot be known except by faith'.[56] This means that the infused virtues also

[50] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (*ST*) I-II 94.2.

[51] *ST* I-II 109.2.

[52] *ST* I 95.1.

[53] *ST* I-II 109.8.

[54] *ST* I-II 109.2.

[55] For Aquinas, the acquired virtues retain their role, but 'the acts of acquired virtue can only be meritorious by the mediation of infused virtue' (*De virtutibus* 1.10, ad 4: 'actus virtutis acquisitae non potest esse meritorius nisi mediante virtute infusa'.). See *ST* I-II 114.2.

[56] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2005.

escape our direct experience. We live them by means of the obscurity of faith, through a glass, darkly.[57]

It is here that the greatness of Aquinas comes to the fore. With supreme confidence in the language of Scripture and in the value of human experience, Aquinas draws on the human experience of acquired virtue to help us understand—by analogy—the workings of infused virtue: we acquire the virtues by repeated actions: actions that we undertake by being initiated into the life and practices of a community, under the direction of mentors.[58] Likewise, we grow in the life of grace and infused virtue by means of repeated actions, but with this difference: growth in this virtue is by means of the mysterious economy of merit.[59] God deepens these virtues in us according to his grace and favor. We grow the way a tree suddenly—and seemingly inexplicably—generates new growth.[60] Moreover, just as we grow by means of mentors, so too we grow in the Christian life by means of the mentorship of Christ. Aquinas embraces the Lord's affirmation that we have only one 'master', recognizing that all earthly 'mentors' or 'masters' are so only 'by participation'.[61] (The English language hinders us here in our efforts to understand what this means: in Greek and Latin, the implied couplet to 'master' is not slave but 'disciple' or more properly, 'apprentice'. A *didaskolos* or *magister*, is a master of a discipline or an expertise [a master carpenter, for example], who initiates his apprentices into this trade.) Christ is the master of the Christian life who initiates us into the practices of the Christian life. Our earthly mentors participate, well or poorly, in Christ's magisterial role in teaching us how to walk in the true way that leads to eternal life.

For Aquinas, the goal of our apprenticeship is growth in charity: growth in the love of God and neighbor, as he explains: 'the spiritual life is lived by charity'.[62] Elsewhere, he affirms this even more directly, 'the entire spiritual life consists in charity'.[63] Growth in virtue is thus growth in charity. To explain this, Aquinas appeals to the stages of natural growth. There is the stage of beginners, which spans from birth to the age of reason; then there is the stage of the proficient, corresponding to the period in childhood between the age of reason and puberty;

[57] 1 Cor 13.12.

[58] For a contemporary account of the role in virtue formation of our initiation into the life and practices of a community, an account that has influenced my portrayal of Aquinas's thought, see Alastair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[59] As Augustine states so beautifully, 'your merits are his gifts' (*Sermo* 298, 4–5 [PL 38:1367]: 'Dona ipsius sunt merita tua'.).

[60] *De virtutibus* 1.11 corpus and ad 14; *ST* I-II 114.1, 4 and 8.

[61] *Super Evangelium Matthaei* 23.1.

[62] *In III Sent*. d. 38, a. 4, co: '*Spiritualis autem vita per caritatem est*'.

[63] *De perfectionis spiritualis vitae* 1: '*totam spiritualem vitam in dilectione consistere*'.

lastly, there is the age of perfection, proper to adulthood.[64] (There was no adolescence among the medievals. Once you could bear children, you were expected to be an adult and live as such.) One implication of this analogy is that Aquinas believes that our regular contact with the growth of children to adulthood will help us understand, by analogy, our own growth in the spiritual life.

This becomes especially evident when we consider how Aquinas appeals to the human experience of friendship (as articulated by Aristotle in books eight and nine of the *Nicomachean Ethics*) to understand the nature of charity, which he famously defines as 'a certain friendship of man for God'.[65] Aristotle portrays friendship as flowing from a certain communion of life (a *koinonia* or *communicatio*), which Aristotle did not think was possible between humans and God.[66] Aquinas recognized, however, that since God communicates a participation of his divine life in the gift of sanctifying grace, a friendship flowing from this *koinonia* is possible, and this friendship is charity.[67] It is by growing in this relationship that we grow in the practices of the Christian life.

But here is the challenge. What happens if we no longer have regular experiences of mentorship in learning the tasks and practices that were traditionally a part human community? What are the implications of this impoverishment for our relationship with God? From the dawn of history, most men and women learned the tasks of human community in an apprenticeship with mentors. Whether this was farming, which had tasks for both men and women, or a town trade like running a shop (which was another place where men and women worked together), or learning the law or being a soldier, all of these tasks were learned by means of a practical apprenticeship. Moreover, what was true of work, was also true of celebration and courtship. Traditional societies sing together and dance together during communal celebrations, which are traditionally places where young men and women can meet and fall in love. The young learn the ways of celebration by gradually being introduced to them by their elders. Not surprisingly, where such communal contact and mentoring have diminished, religious practice has also fallen away.

This is where Aquinas can help us, because he calls us—as an antidote—to go back to nature and to the practices of nature. Nature is still the playground of grace, and these traditional practices still provide analogies for understanding the life of grace. It is an ancient insight. Shakespeare, whenever his characters begin losing sight of who

[64] *ST* II-II 24.9.

[65] *ST* II-II 23.1: 'caritas amicitia quaedam est hominis ad deum'.

[66] *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.7 (1158b33–36, 1159a3–5).

[67] *ST* II-II 23.1: 'Cum igitur sit aliqua communicatio hominis ad deum secundum quod nobis suam beatitudinem communicat, super hac communicatione oportet aliquam amicitiam fundari'.

they are, sends them out into the green of the forest. When, for example, Touchstone, the court fool in *As You Like It*, encounters Corin the shepherd in the Forest of Arden and asks whether there is any philosophy in him, Corin responds with truisms such as 'the property of rain is to wet, and fire to burn…. and that a great cause of the night is lack of the sun'.[68] There is thus the call to return to simple truths. In the aftermath of the Second World War, in 1948, someone else drew upon Shakespeare to make this same point: George Orwell. In *1984*, what does Winston Smith say: 'Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet'.[69]

But the call to return to nature does not require us to separate from society and embrace preindustrial practices. The return to nature envisioned here is the return to simple truths.[70] Simple practices like learning to play a musical instrument or to speak a new language offer ample opportunities for learning the ways of apprenticeship. Organized sports can play a similar role. Moreover, families can still come together for the common activities of making and sharing a meal, and with other families can rediscover the joy of singing and even dancing together. It is also at this level that one learns the civic practices of local democratic governance, by participating in local elections, party gatherings, and community decisions. All of this is ordered to the very human activity of discovering and learning to love the true, the good and the beautiful.

Thomas Aquinas remains a patron of the schools at precisely this level. His theology reminds us that the God of redemption in Christ is the God of nature. Indeed, it is in the very act of saving us from sin and death that Christ reveals the true beauty of creation. Through the incarnation even the humblest things, bread and wine, oil and water, can become the means of salvation and communion with the Triune God: 'The Word made flesh makes true bread flesh / and mere wine

[68] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* 3.2.

[69] George Orwell, *1984*, Everyman's Library Edition (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 84.

[70] The dissidents from Central and Eastern Europe who also resisted oppression by remaining faithful to simple truths, such as how to make good Pilsen lager, saw their efforts as creating a parallel society (a 'parallel *polis*') that, far from withdrawing them from the larger society, was at the service of society. See Václav Benda, 'The Parallel Polis' (1978) and Václav Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless' (1978), both contained in Václav Havel *et al.*, John Keane, ed., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1985). Havel states this explicitly: 'it would be quite wrong to understand the parallel structure and the parallel *polis* as a retreat into a ghetto and as an act of isolation, addressing itself only to the welfare of those who had decided on such a course, and who are indifferent to the rest. It would be wrong, in short, to consider it an essentially group solution that has nothing to do with the general situation. Such a concept would, from the start, alienate the notion of living within the truth from its proper point of departure, which is concern for others, transforming it ultimately into just another more sophisticated version of "living within the lie"' (p. 80).

it makes the blood of Christ'.[71] For Aquinas, the friendship with God that is charity draws the Christian into the sacramental mystery of Christ's cross and resurrection. The sacraments heal and nourish us so that, in Christ and through the action of his Spirit, we participate in the mission of making the Father's love known to the world. In the final analysis, successive generations have celebrated Thomas Aquinas because his theology continues to lead us to celebrate the Triune God of our Redemption.

Acknowledgments

Open access funding provided by Université de Fribourg.

Michael S. Sherwin OP
Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy

michael.sherwin@pust.it

[71] From the fourth stanza of the *Pange lingua*, a hymn composed by Aquinas for the feast of *Corpus Christi*. The original Latin is: 'Verbum caro panem verum Verbo carnem efficit; / Fit sanguis Christi merum'. For more on this hymn, see Jan-Heiner Tück, *A Gift of Presence: The Theology and Poetry of the Eucharist in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), pp. 175-193.

© 2023 The Authors. *New Blackfriars* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.